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ABSTRACT

When students inductively study linguistic patterns and then apply their understanding to achieve sentence variety, their interest in composition is heightened and their writing styles improve. Through examples in music and in nonsense and model sentences, students became aware of their language's basic structural patterns (subject-verb word order) and, by developing skills in varying these patterns, they are able to achieve greater sophistication in their written expression. (MF)

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Linguistics, A Key To Composition?

EILEEN M. OICKLE [1]

When a linguistic approach to sentence variety was used inductively student-interest was heightened and communication clarified.

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS of the typical teenager is his struggle to attain maturity. Nowhere is his problem more apparent than to the English teacher as she reads students' themes. No matter how much Johnny swaggers through the door, no matter how much hair he is sprouting on upper lip and lower chin, and no matter how much physical acumen he has attained, he is reduced to a mumbling child the minute he is required to write.

Searching for a solution, I considered that a linguistic approach is one sensible method to try. For years the average youngster has been told what we want, but not how to do it. Linguistics offers the language patterns to attain this goal. Using one of the most common writing problems, a lack of sentence variety, I tried this plan of attack: The natural structure of an English sentence is a subject-verb word order and it is difficult for the student to break away from this conditioned pattern. Furthermore, since most students are unaware of the pattern of their language, they readily fall into the trap and have trouble avoiding it. Therefore, I decided it was necessary to make them aware of their language's structural patterns so they could surmount their difficulties.

Starting from a level which would be interesting and readily understandable for them, I selected two records to demonstrate patterns of sound. Using the term *sound* at its simplest level, I requested the students to make a line graph of the fluctuations and variations of the sounds they heard. Record number one was Ravel's "Bolero," chosen for its repeating sound pattern. Record number two was a selection of Strauss waltzes which offered a variation of sounds. The students listened about one minute to each record; then they put their graphs on the board with colored chalk. We talked about the various patterns of the two sounds and noted the difference. The majority of the students preferred record two which had the greater sound variation and wasn't as repetitious as record one.

From a discussion of sound variations as a point of departure, I asked the class if language had a pattern. If so, could they discover

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the pattern? Placing a nonsense sentence on the board, I asked them to try and decode it by identifying the possible parts of speech, i.e., *Ze seg gurps se ret*. The students laughed and then quickly responded by identifying the first word as an article or adjective, the second as a possible noun, the third as a verb, the fourth as another article, and the last word possibly as another noun. When asked how they knew since this was a strange language, they responded, "That is the way it is in English!"

"Well, how is that way?"

After a little fumbling one student said, "Most sentences in English start with either an article and a noun followed by a verb, or a noun then a verb."

"What would happen if I changed the two nouns around?"

"It would change the meaning of the sentence," was the reply.

"Why?"

Eventually the fact that English depended upon a word order pattern was established. In our discussion of language, students acknowledged that in their foreign languages of Latin and German, word recognition depended upon inflectional endings, not location in the sentence.

After establishing the word order pattern of English, I had the students turn to two paragraphs. The students read the paragraphs [2] silently for meaning and for their preference for style. Then I asked them to identify each subject by a number designating the position in which the subject appeared in the sentence: 1, 2, 3, etc. The paragraphs, quoted here with the publishers' permission, are marked as the students had identified the positions of the subjects.

Par. 1 The[2] trial had been scheduled for two o'clock. The audi[2]ence was noisily settling itself in the courtroom for the coming show. The law[2]yers were quietly talking and shuffling piles of papers at the polished tables in front of the room. The b[2]ell in the courthouse tower struck two in resounding tones. Judge[1] Walker, dignified in his long black gown, walked slowly to his bench. . . .

Par. 2 The[2] trial had been scheduled for two o'clock. In the courtroom the audi[5]ence was noisily settling itself for the coming show. At the polished tables in the front of the room, the law[12]yers were

[2]John E. Warriner, *English Grammar and Composition*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958, pp. 183-184.

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quietly talking and shuffling piles of papers. When the bell in the courthouse tower struck two in resounding tones, Judge[13] Walker, dignified in his long black gown, walked slowly to his bench. . . .

After allowing time for the marking of their observations, I asked if they could define the difference between the two paragraphs. The students readily replied that in *paragraph one* the order of the subject was either first or second. However, in *paragraph two* the word order or sentence pattern had been changed so that the subject was one, two, five, or even twelve. The students read each paragraph aloud and reached the conclusion that *paragraph two* had a pleasing variety. Then I asked if they could find any similarity between the patterns of the records and the paragraphs. Quickly the class noted that *paragraph one* like *record one* was a repeating pattern and *paragraph two* showed variation. Calling upon their previous language background, the students listed the various ways the writer had changed the word order for these variations. Prepositional phrases, adverbs, and subordinate clauses used as introductory elements were some of the ways they discovered.

To reinforce still further the monotony and immaturity of writing without sentence variety, I brought out the primer, *The Little White House,* which many of the students had used in their elementary years. Upon reading some of the pages aloud, the class grinned and the lesson struck home.

We also talked about ways in which a writer might want to write a series of sentences without varying his sentence patterns. The class decided that a repetition of a pattern would be good for emphasis; then they pointed out the dialogue used in television's Dragnet shows. One student remembered that in Hemingway's story, "The Big Two-Hearted River," a repetition of subject-verb word order was used to show action and to build tension.

From here, the idea of sentences having a pattern and an order became infectious. The class wanted to find out the various possible patterns of English sentences. So going back to our original nonsense sentence, I asked the class to see how many possibilities beside the first they could work out. Some of the class started with the original nonsense sentence; others wrote their own. The students then broke into groups and tried to see whether one of the other groups could "crack the code." Eventually we worked through all nine basic sentence patterns.

Through our work, the students began to sensitize themselves to language. By looking for possible translations of the nonsense

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sentences, they reinforced the idea that words can be identified and classified by function and form as well as by position. For example, a word may be identified as *subject* by function, but a *noun* by form. Consequently, they discovered that an English sentence is not only an ordering of words, but also an arrangement of words in their capacity as parts of speech.

Branching out from these basic sentence patterns, the students experimented with various modifiers and constructions which could be used to build sentence structure. Paragraph assignments became challenges to see how well they could handle the tools of their language. Rapidly their style improved. Thinking of sentences as structural patterns that they could build, change, and adapt for their own purposes, the students began to view themselves as architects of their language. A writing assignment became not a mass of words filling a paper, but an opportunity to construct meaningful and varied sentences.

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